

# PUBLIC SERVICE REVIEW

Summer 2021 | Volume 3 | Issue 1

## Creating an Idealistic Democracy

Hear more from students, like Jody-Ann Campbell, a student at Lincoln University, who shares how national events shaped her work at the local level.

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# PUBLIC SERVICE REVIEW

SUMMER 2021 | VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

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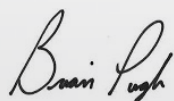
# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The Stennis Center for Public Service is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative branch agency created by Congress in 1988 to promote the highest ideals of public service in America. In 2020, we created *Public Service Review* to provide a forum for young leaders to share their inspirations, experiences, and hopes and dreams as they work as interns and volunteers in the public service sector and, in many cases, prepare for careers in public service. The voices expressed in these articles are honest and heartfelt. This special edition features eight students from across the United States who share their thoughts and perspectives on national security, military service, and American democracy. Should you read into their words any partisan viewpoint, please remember that these individuals speak for themselves and not for the Stennis Center, their university, or any organization featured in this edition.

In this special edition, you will hear from Grant Booker, a student and class president at the U.S. Naval Academy, and Julia Nilsson, a student at Brigham Young University and Bradley E. Johanson Scholarship recipient, who share how their military experiences inspired them to provide service to others. You will also hear from leaders, such as Jordan Branchman, Jody-Ann Campbell, and Omar Khasawneh, who reflect on how national events, like the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and the COVID-19 pandemic, shaped their approach to service at the local level.

This edition also includes three inspirational interviews with national leaders and experts. First, former U.S. Representative Gregg Harper reflects on his time in Congress and shares some of his most worthwhile experiences and accomplishments. Second, Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer Mike McCord discusses his current role at the U.S. Department of Defense and issues around national security. Lastly, Dr. Colin H. Kahl, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the U.S. Department of Defense, shares his experience as a former speech and debate competitor and how it led him to a career in public service.

*Public Service Review* is a place for talented and principled young leaders to tell their stories in the hope that others can learn and draw from their experiences. The stories featured in this edition were written from a place of honesty and integrity. We hope these stories and interviews can inform and inspire readers of different perspectives as we all work toward a better future.



Dr. Brian Pugh  
Executive Director  
Stennis Center for Public Service

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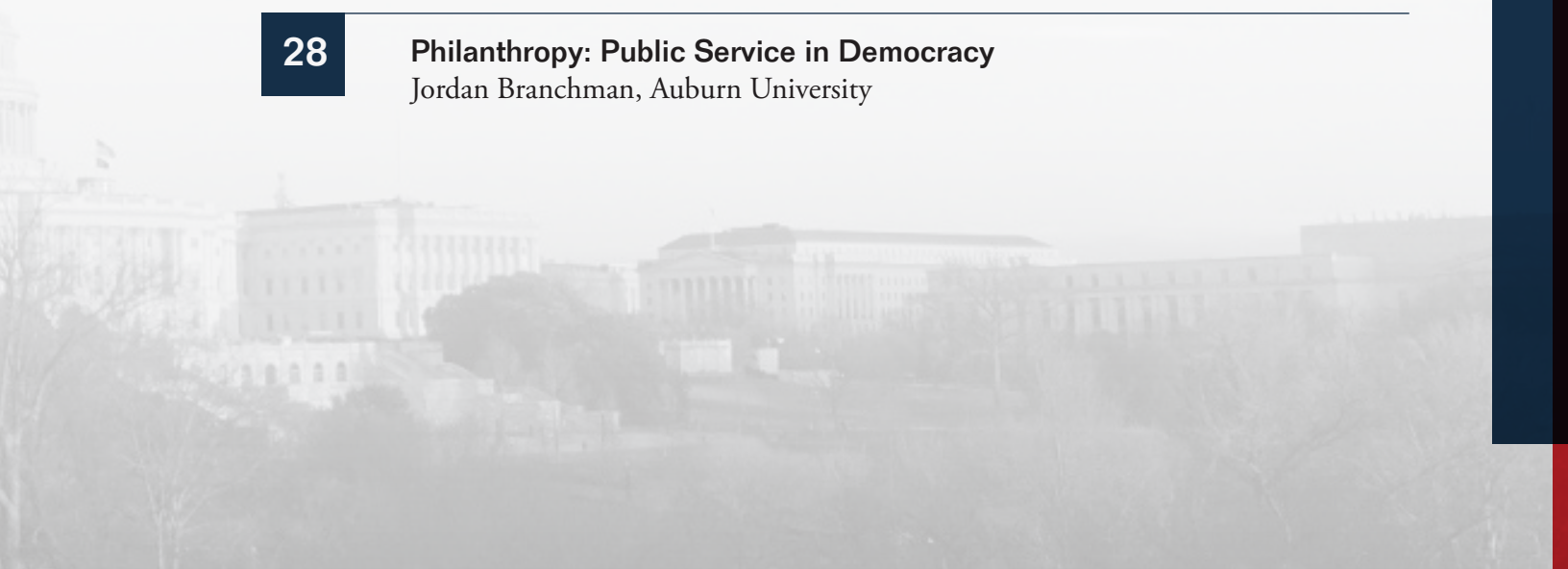
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# HAYDEN RICHARDSON

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY,  
TRUMAN-ALBRIGHT FELLOW

## Interview with Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer Mike McCord



**H**ayden Richardson serves as the program assistant and Truman-Albright Fellow for the Stennis Center for Public Service. She completed her undergraduate degree at Northwestern University with Honors,

double majoring in political science and legal studies. Hayden was awarded the Political Science Prize for top Honors thesis and was cited in *The New York Times*. In addition, Hayden was elected as Political Science Senior Marshal at graduation out of the 150 graduates as embodying the department's values.

Read an excerpt of Hayden Richardson's interview with Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer Mike McCord, where they discuss his long tenure in public service, his current role at the U.S. Department of Defense, and national security. For the full interview, please visit [www.stennis.gov](http://www.stennis.gov).

**Hayden Richardson:** Can you open us up with a brief introduction and tell us more about your experience at the U.S. Department of Defense?

**Mike McCord:** It has been about six weeks since I was sworn in by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III to be one of the Under Secretaries of Defense. I am the first person to do the job twice [as the Department's Under Secretary for the Comptroller]. Essentially, I am the money person and the Chief Financial Officer for the U.S. Department of Defense. I was in the Defense Department for eight years [under the Obama Administration]; the first five years or so as a Deputy to this position and in my current role in the latter part of Obama's Administration.

**Hayden:** How did public service become such an instrumental part of your life?

**McCord:** I would say it started in the backseat of my parent's car. I only took two kinds of vacations as a child. We would travel to see our relatives or visit sites that had historical value, particularly to the Revolutionary War era or Civil War era, and it instilled in me an interest in our nation's history that I never lost.

At first, I wanted to be a historian because I read a lot of history, and we visited many historical sites. Then I became interested in economics. I decided that the federal government was the niche that fit me best. My first job in Washington, D.C., was in national defense, and I was fascinated. The Defense Department is the largest organization, with millions of employees, millions of acres of land, trillions of dollars in assets. It has every kind of problem and every kind of issue. It constantly changes and is endlessly challenging and interesting, so I have stuck with this field ever since.

**Hayden:** What do you think is the most significant national security issue we face in the United States?

**McCord:** The Defense Department answers this question in a few ways. The most existential threat to our national security is climate change. The Department of Defense recognizes that it is not a military threat but a threat to our way of life. The most near-term threat is COVID-19, which crippled the economy and killed thousands of people. It is not a military threat per se but a national security threat?

Personally, I believe our greatest threat right now is our internal division as a society—the red-blue divide. We see it in

examples like the last election, who should be allowed to vote, the politicization of the COVID-19 vaccine. That threat to our unity as a nation is a real concern that supersedes the bounds of my professional life where the answer would be China.

**Hayden:** What is the role of the partisan divide in national or domestic terrorism?

**McCord:** There are certainly some examples of domestic terrorism like the Jan. 6 insurrection. I believe a more significant threat is how divided we are over politics. That we are not all in this together is still a massive problem for us and one where public service/national service can play a role. It is a major leadership challenge and an example of how national security is much broader than the defense or military. The solution is beyond the realm of the Defense Department.

The military is about 1% of the population, and 1% cannot save 99%. Many people do not know anyone that serves in the military because the military has turned into more of a family business in recent years. Children, nieces and nephews, and the spouses of military people are the ones most likely to serve. Now, there is a solution to that, right? It is called the draft. There is little interest to return to a draft, but that was a hallmark of the World War II-era when you had this mass mobilization of society for this existential threat to democracy and at a time when almost 10% of the population was in the military. The military consisted of people from different parts of the country and different economic backgrounds, but now the military is such a small part of our society for that alone to propagate.

**Hayden:** How can we expand further reach of the military into society?

**McCord:** It goes back to our need for a sense of unity and common purpose, and it probably lies more in national service than it does in military service. National service is a real beacon of opportunity for us if we can make it, maybe not universal, but more of an expectation. That is a major issue around national service – whether it should be compulsory or not. There are a lot of factors that make national service complicated. However, the potential payoff [of national service] is large and an opportunity that should be explored.

**Hayden:** To circle back, we talked about political polarization and disparities within the military. Is it a stretch to say the Jan. 6 insurrection is a symptom of those deeper sentiments?

**McCord:** Around the Vietnam War, there was conflict around who was exempted from the draft and who was not. There was a perception that certain people knew how to get out of it, and other people did not. However, over time, people started to describe the military as an “all-volunteer force,” but it is also an “all-recruited force.” People do not line up to join the military, so we expend our efforts to recruit. It started as a “all-volunteer force,” but some people use the phrase “all-recruited force” or “all-professional force.”

The danger is that if the military starts to see itself as a sepa-

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rate group that believes it is better than the people it serves, more moral than the people it serves, more patriotic than the people it serves, that creates an unhealthy dynamic. People have noted the proportion of veterans who participated in the Jan. 6 insurrection, and I would hate to paint it with too broad a brush because each of those people might have their own story unrelated to the military. The idea of the military as a separate, and maybe a better, more patriotic, subset of America is a concern of many civil-military experts.

There is also the issue that social media enables people to have their own version of the truth. It is a whole other trend that I do not think has a connection to how many of us do or do not serve in the military.

**National service is a real beacon of opportunity for us if we can make it, maybe not universal, but more of an expectation. That is a major issue around national service – whether it should be compulsory or not.**

**Mike McCord**

**Hayden:** What do you think caused the Jan. 6 insurrection?

**McCord:** Your question is the reason why I think there should be an independent investigation. The committee should include professional investigators [not just members of Congress] who have proven useful in the past, e.g., the 9/11 Commission. The causes of the Jan. 6 insurrection are abided by several factors where an investigation is warranted. I also think it is more so a question about the root causes that predispose people to react in that way in the first place.

**Hayden:** I want to zoom out a bit to understand better what it means to be the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller). What does your job look like day-to-day?

**McCord:** The Defense Department has about 1.4 million military members and about 900,000 in the National Guard and Reserves, and about 750,000 civilian employees, in addition to contractors that provide support. Pre-COVID-19, more than 20,000 people worked inside the Pentagon, but it is a bit lower now, and quite a few people telework.



The Office of the Secretary of Defense sits on top and provides policy guidance. The office has one Under Secretary that handles the foreign policy portfolio. One handles intelligence, and one handles personnel issues, i.e., the Chief Human Capital Officer. Another one is the equivalent of the Chief Technology Officer. I am the Chief Financial Officer.

I have around 250 direct reports and two defense agencies that report to me, one has 5,000 people, and the other has 10,000 people. Beyond that, I am the policymaker for about 50,000 people who do resourcing in the Defense Department. From the U.S. National Guard to the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marines.

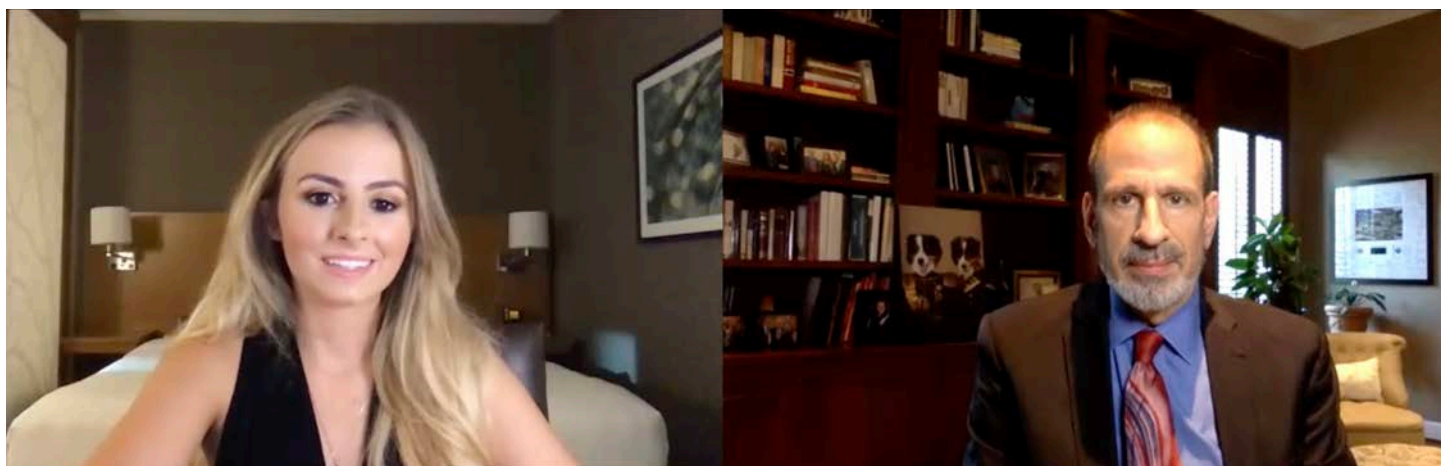
My field consists mostly of career professionals who are budget experts, audit experts, etc. I provide the leadership and policy direction on behalf of the Secretary of Defense and the President. There is a sense of mission for us, and we feel like we help solve problems for people who serve our country. It is what drew me

back after 32 years of federal service when I stepped down at the end of my first tour in this position. I like to be on the inside, whether in Congress or the Defense Department, solving problems. I feel lucky I got my wish and that I was able to have this job not once but twice.

**Hayden:** Do you have any imparting words for young people who want to enter public service?

**McCord:** My predecessor, Comptroller Bob Ellis, use to refer to the job as a “driving home satisfaction.” If you leave your workday feeling like you have accomplished something, that is the “driving home satisfaction.” I have found that to be true.

**Hayden:** Thank you so much, Mr. McCord!







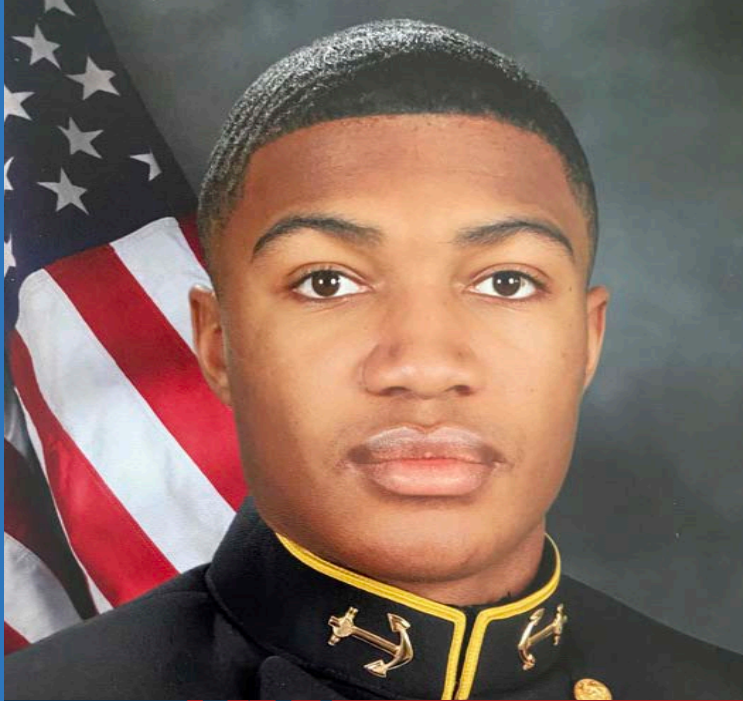
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# GRANT BOOKER

U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY

## A Point of Pride and Honor

**G**rant Booker is a junior at the U.S. Naval Academy. He is a political science major and serves as the class president of 2023.

On August 1, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed a group of midshipmen in Bancroft Hall. He shared the following: “I can imagine a no more rewarding career. And any man [or woman] who may be asked in this century what he did to make his [or her] life worthwhile, I think can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction: ‘I served in the United States Navy.’” President Kennedy’s words could not be truer. To serve, in any capacity, is a point of pride and honor. Service provides purpose and meaning to the lives of those who aspire to give back.

Throughout my formative years, I dreamed of becoming an orthopedic surgeon. When asked why I wanted to pursue this career path, I told people what sounded “right” to me: I would blandly reply that I “wanted to help people” or that I “wanted to make a difference.” Though physicians certainly do help people in many ways, this was not my true reasoning. I had no real passion for medicine, and though I do have a passion for helping others, the medical field did not suit my interests. In reality, I was more attracted to the overall prestige of the medical field and the impressive salary I would earn as an orthopedic surgeon. As I matured, I realized that while individual desires are important, marrying passion with a purpose brings about a greater sense of fulfillment. One of my favorite Bible scriptures comes from 1 Corinthians 13:11, which reads, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” As I have grown older, this verse impacted how I understood service, and



I have come to appreciate how essential true impassioned service to others is in life.

This awareness led me to the U.S. Naval Academy. As I began to explore a life of service more seriously, the armed forces presented itself as an option I had never considered. I have always wanted to grow as a leader, and I have a genuine love for helping people, so I began exploring whether the military might suit my talents and interests. I spoke at length with my grandfather, a Vietnam veteran and a Marine. He imparted to me the leadership he experienced, the relationships he fostered, and the valuable life lessons he learned while in the armed forces. When I shared with him that I

was making my college decision between accepting a ROTC scholarship to Vanderbilt University and the Naval Academy, he urged me to go north to Annapolis, Maryland. He told me that in his experience, the best leaders he had ever encountered came from the Naval Academy and that I would have the best development opportunities at that institution. I wrestled with the decision, but my grandfather’s advice ultimately persuaded me to attend the Naval Academy.

My grandfather passed away unexpectedly in December 2020. Unfortunately, he will not see me graduate in 2023. However, one of my proudest life moments to date was taking part in his graveside service along with his oldest grandchild, my cousin, who is now a captain in the Marine Corps. As we stood attention during his military honors, an overwhelming sense of pride, meaning, and purpose welled up inside me, and I was certain that I had inherited the love for service he embodied.

Since arriving at the Naval Academy, I have been fortunate to have had numerous opportunities to serve in various leadership





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Leadership is service. That is a great responsibility, but the sense of fulfillment and joy gained from serving and helping others is one that cannot be gleaned from any other experience.

”

GRANT BOOKER

positions. The most impactful opportunity was my appointment as president for the Class of '23. Initially, I had no desire to become a class officer. Though I have a passion for leadership and service, I was afraid to take on a role of this magnitude. These experiences have allowed me to learn about myself, learn what authentic leadership entails, and explore how I can best serve according to my talents and interests. I am learning with each passing day what it means to be an effective leader.

My time as class president has taught me two key lessons. First, I have learned that the most critical mission of a leader is and always will be supporting the people they lead. There will always be an objective for the group or team to accomplish, but as leaders, our main focus must be on the people first; leaders have the unique opportunity to touch lives, influence perspectives, and help others. When people are taken care of, they perform their jobs better and are also provided an environment where they can grow and develop as leaders in their own rights. Second, I have learned that the opportunity to lead is both a privilege and a responsibility. Effective leadership requires a sacrifice of time and energy and a commitment to put the needs of the group members and mission above individual desires. More simply, leadership is service. That is a great responsibility, but the sense of fulfillment and joy gained from serving and helping others is one that cannot be gleaned from any other experience. For this reason, I can say with confidence that going the extra mile for each task and person is always worth the added time and effort it takes. I have found these two lessons applicable not just in the military or at the Naval Academy but also in all facets of life.

I hope to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and commission into the Marine Corps upon graduation. In my experience, I have been fortunate to interact with Marine Corps officers who have embodied strong leadership qualities and mentored and guided me on how to develop myself as a leader. These mentors have demonstrated to me how impactful the role of an officer is in influencing the lives of multitudes of people. Both in my journey as a Naval Academy midshipman and in looking forward to my future as an officer, I had found the meaning and purpose I sought when I first began to consider my role in life as a servant. For me, the Marine Corps is the perfect place to lead, grow, and make a meaningful difference in the world. A lifetime of service is a privilege every person can take hold of and one that each person should strive toward in whatever way best suits them. I look forward to seeing where my service takes me.



**MIA**  
**ROBERTSON**  
PROGRAM ASSISTANT,  
STENNIS CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

## Interview with Dr. Colin H. Kahl, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

**M**ia Robertson is a Presidential-Endowed Scholar and John C. Stennis Scholar in the Mississippi State University (MSU) Shackouls Honors College, where she majors in political science and minors in pre-law and sociology. She works as a program assistant at the Stennis Center for Public Service, where she develops resources for schools that hope to excel in speech and debate competitions on the high school level.

Read Mia's interview with Dr. Colin H. Kahl, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the U.S. Department of Defense, where he shares his experience as a former speech and debate competitor and how it led him to a career in public service.

**Mia Robertson:** Do you mind introducing yourself and telling us about your experience at the U.S. Department of Defense and your day-to-day tasks?

**Dr. Colin H. Kahl:** The Under Secretary of Defense for Policy is not a job many people know about. It is essentially the No. 3 civilian position at the Pentagon. My role is to serve as the National Security Advisor to the Secretary of Defense, so I advise the Secretary on foreign policy and national security matters. I help the Secretary oversee our defense strategies, policies, war plans, and operations around the world. I also help the Secretary in defense diplomacy with our allies and partners around the world and in interfacing with the White House, the U.S. State Department, and the intelligence community as it relates to what we call the "interagency." I oversee a workforce of about 1,500 people, and we staff the Secretary on these issues.

**Mia:** Why did you decide to pursue public service, and more specifically, why did you pursue service at the Defense Department?

**Dr. Kahl:** I should be clear that I am a Defense Department civilian. I have never been a service member in the armed forces,

but I work alongside the men and women in our armed forces every day. I am an academic by training; I went to college at the University of Michigan and debated in high school and college. Then, I got my Ph.D. in political science with a focus on international relations at Columbia University. I taught at the University of Minnesota and Georgetown. I am currently on leave from Stanford University, where I am a professor.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, like many Americans who focused on international relations and international security, I was intensely focused on the events of that day. It made me think about how I could do more than write articles and sit in the ivory tower. I could give back to my country. So, I did a stint at the Pentagon in the George W. Bush Administration. I had a fellowship program that placed me at the Pentagon from 2005-2006. I came back early in the Obama Administration as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East when we drew down our forces in Iraq and around the time of Arab Spring. Then, I returned to the Obama Administration for the last two and a half years to serve at the White House as then-Vice President Biden's National Security Advisor. I was also a Deputy Assistant to President Obama. Now, I am back at the Pentagon. I believe that I am an academic – that is my full-time job - but if I can take time off to serve my country and help keep my country safe, that is the least I can do.

**Mia:** It is so admirable that you saw a need for public servants like yourself and stepped in to fill that role, so thank you so much for your public service. As you mentioned, you competed in speech and debate at the high school and collegiate levels. What events did you compete in? How did you decide to pursue speech and debate? Did a mentor or someone encourage you?



**Dr. Kahl:** Yeah, I was a smart-aleck kid. Between eighth and ninth grade, I received a letter from the forensics coach at the high school because I was tracked to be in a few honors programs. I suspected he just sent letters to everyone who was supposed to be in certain classes to see if we would like to try out speech and debate. I did. I loved to argue with my parents, so I figured I might like to argue with other students. I did policy debate in high school for four years. I also did extemporaneous debate for four years. I was all-in. At the end of my high school career, I had participated in 500 debate rounds.

I went to a high school that did not have much money, so we ran a food stand that raised money for the debate team. I was at a tournament almost every week for four years and traveled the country and California, my home state. I went to a public school called John F. Kennedy. I went to the Tournament of Champions three times and the National Forensics League (*now known as the National Speech and Debate Association*) tournament a few times. I was an all-in debate nerd in high school.

I debated in college; I did the National Debate Tournament (NDT), so policy debate in college and debated for about two and a half years. I was in the finals of the NDT my sophomore year in college, and I was in the finals of the Tournament of Champions my senior year of high school. So, it was a big part of my life.

**Mia:** It sounds like it played a huge role in your academic experience. I like that you mentioned that you went to a school that did not have many resources, and you guys did what you needed to do to get the resources to compete. I think that is true for many schools around the country. People want to debate, but they do not necessarily have the resources to do it. Along that same vein, the Stennis Center for Public Service believes that speech and debate motivates and propels students to pursue public service careers or be leaders in their communities. Did you find that speech and debate motivated you to pursue public service, or did it at least provide you with skills you still use today?

**Dr. Kahl:** Speech and debate was the most important formative experience of my life. I say that as an older man; I am 50 years old. To this day, it is the single most important thing I ever did. Most high school students do not focus on issues related to national or foreign policy. Or, if they do, they might be interested in a particular issue like gun control, for example, or a human rights campaign. What debate forced me to do - and extemporaneous debate has this role too - was to cast my intellectual net broadly and think from an early age about how we could translate our ideas about the world into concrete calls for action - topics like water quality, agricultural policy political stability in Latin America, and retirement security. When I was in college, I debated energy policy, privacy rights, and trade policy in Asia. No other activity would expose a 14-, 15-, 16-year-old kid to these many issues. It opened my mind about the world, and I do not doubt that that carried on into my desire to do public service and give back. It also generated some concrete skills that I think have allowed me to succeed.



**Mia:** I love that you mention the array of speech and debate topics. I can assure you my parents were confused when I talked about the ins and outs of H-1B visas. It is such a unique activity in that way.

One of the issues raised by national security experts in recent years is a concern about the balance of power and relations between senior civilian and military leaders in the Defense Department. As one of its most senior leaders, you have the authority and responsibility to set policy for the military without necessarily needing to persuade senior military leaders, though that is usually desirable, if possible. But there are probably times when the authority of your position, as well as your personal skills and credibility, matter when you work with a general or admiral with decades of military experience on an issue where you may disagree. Are there skills or lessons from speech and debate you draw from in such situations?

**Dr. Kahl:** We have a long tradition of civilian control of the military. Obviously, the President is a civilian official, and the President is the Commander in Chief. The Secretary of Defense is the most senior official in the Defense Department, and he or she is also a civilian. We have civilian service Secretaries, so the Secretary of the Army, Air Force, and Navy are civilian. It has long been Americans' belief that civilian control of our military is the bedrock of our democracy. But we see our military colleagues here as partners; I guess there is a degree of hierarchy, but it is a

constant dialogue. The reality is that our men and women in uniform bring extraordinary experiences and a much different vantage point than civilians, like me, who have not served in uniform. Of course, we have some civilians who have served in uniform; our current Secretary was a former four-star general. So, it is a mix of experiences that people bring to the table.

First, you must have listening skills. Second, especially in debate where you are forced to take both sides of an issue, that trains you to take the other side's arguments seriously and not be rigidly locked into an ideological position. The best I can do as a civilian leader at the Pentagon is to ask smart questions and keep an open mind. I do not go into a meeting thinking, "I have to win this argument." A lot of it involves engaging in dialogue and persuading the other side that my position makes more sense and, frankly, be open to persuasion by the other side too. I think there are skills in debate, like speaking off-the-cuff, being organized in presentation, marrying logical warrants with the call for empirical evidence, structuring arguments persuasively, and certain rhetorical skills that help in a lot in these conversations. But it is the listening, critical thinking, and open mind characteristics that I would emphasize.

**Mia:** Most people will not rise to your level professionally or become a public figure, but today's students face a challenge more severe now than when you were a student. That is the massive amount of misinformation and disinformation on the internet. Are there lessons to be learned from speech and debate that could help someone be a positive citizen and informed voter?

**Dr. Kahl:** First, there are so many ways to serve. One does not have to say, "What if I don't grow up to be the National Security Advisor or the Under Secretary of this or that." All of us are democratic citizens. Every two years, we can choose our leaders. We have learned especially over the last few years that voting matters. These elections have enormous consequences. People can also serve in their communities through nonprofits or religious organizations. People can serve on school boards or in state and local government. People can serve at the national level, join the armed forces, the Foreign Service, or the Peace Corps. There are so many ways to serve, and I would encourage everyone to find a way to serve their community in some way because it is important. It keeps our social fabric tight, and it is extraordinarily rewarding. In terms of our current environment, I encourage people to use skills from debate to identify the logical arguments and empirical reference points to substantiate those arguments. Also, try to read widely. Nowadays, there is so much information that none of us can consume it all. So, we tend to be inside our own bubbles or echo chambers. We only look at certain news feeds, listen to certain news programs, watch certain videos on YouTube, and follow certain people on social media platforms. Force yourself to dip into other people's ecosystems periodically.

One danger we have to our democracy right now is that we will have two or three separate conversations going on. We talk past each other. We use different facts, different arguments, different assumptions. If you force yourself to engage in an ecosystem

that is not your own periodically, it will give you some empathy on why people hold certain views and arm you with the perspectives so that you can go out into the world and change some minds.

**Mia:** Thank you. Do you have any last words for students in debate programs or for those who are interested in debate?

**Dr. Kahl:** It does not matter whether you aspire to be in public service. There is no activity that better prepares you for success in life than speech and debate. First, it imbues in you an enormous amount of confidence. When you stand in front of others, take a risk, and put yourself out there—people see that confidence. Frankly, you must fake it till you make it. Everyone goes through a sense of imposter syndrome. "I'm not quite ready. I'm not smart enough." Speech and debate imbues that confidence that sets you up to do well no matter what career you pursue. I would also say that the research skills, the organizational skills, the analytical thinking skills, and the ability to translate that into written and oral arguments will serve you well, whether it is in the business world or the public sector. So, thank you for pursuing these activities already and encouraging others to pursue them. Debate transformed my life, and I continue to be a passionate advocate for it. So, do it!

**Mia:** Thank you so much, Dr. Kahl. It is so wonderful to see former speech and debate competitors excel in life and serve our country. So, thank you.







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OMAR  
KHASAWNEH

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY-CAMDEN

## Healing Together as One

**O**mar Khasawneh majors in dual biology and global studies at Rutgers University-Camden, with the ultimate goal of addressing global healthcare disparities.

Life started to feel like the movie *Groundhog Day* during the first summer of the pandemic. My days were routine and uneventful – a feeling expressed throughout the country by other students whose semester ended and whose internships were canceled. Then, through the stroke of luck, I found an escape that would forever change my life.

I was on social media when I saw a post about the need for EMTs, among other health professionals, in Navajo Nation. Being from New Jersey—a state with one of the lowest American Indian/Alaska Native populations—my education on this population was, admittedly, lacking. However, I knew that they were one of the hardest-hit groups by the pandemic, and I did not want to pass up the opportunity to help. So, I took a leap of faith.

The next weekend, I hopped on a plane at LaGuardia and flew to Arizona to volunteer at a native rural health facility just south of the Navajo reservation. I worked as a public health technician, where I assisted with case management and contact tracing. This entailed monitoring people with positive COVID-19 results, providing public health education, and ensuring people had all essentials needed during quarantine. Though I did most of my work at the clinic by phone, I spent part of my time on the Navajo reservation, where I delivered much-needed supplies to people in quarantine and continued contact tracing for people unreachable by phone.

I spent three weeks there in the summer of 2020 before I returned home to prepare for the fall semester.

They say you learn something new every day, but during my few weeks in Navajo Nation, I felt like I learned a lifetime's

worth of information on which I had previously missed out. This information surprised me, and it is most likely information that many Americans do not know about the Navajo Nation and other indigenous groups. For instance, nearly 30% of homes on the Navajo reservation do not have running water, and around one in ten do not even have electricity. Navajo Nation is slightly larger than West Virginia, making it larger than ten U.S. states and three times the size of my home state of New Jersey. But despite its size, it only has six supermarkets. In addition, there is a heightened risk for many health conditions, and poverty is widespread among indigenous populations. Though I learned primarily about Navajo Nation, hundreds of other tribes around the country face similar issues. I had to travel 2,000 miles to learn this.

This did not seem like the America I knew. Why did I not learn about this in school? Why do people still not know about all these disparities faced by our fellow Americans? I left with more questions than when I came. I went there because I knew people needed help, but I did not fully comprehend the scope of the issues people faced. The pandemic only exploited problems that were already present among indigenous groups—problems they will continue to face if no one steps up to help.

I became disappointed in my education for failing to teach me about these communities and motivated to learn more about Indian country. During my winter break, I decided to return to Winslow, Arizona, and pick up right where I left off. Though it looked like brighter days ahead for the pandemic, there was still plenty of work left to do.

While at work at the clinic in early January 2021, I tuned into the news. Like many around the country, I was shocked to see the events that took place on Jan. 6 in Washington, D.C. What started as a gathering of people outside the U.S. Capitol quickly evolved into a full-on riot that threatened the foundation of our democra-



cy. While I am a proponent of the first amendment and welcome anyone's alternative viewpoints, like many Americans, I believe there are other ways to enact social and political changes that do not involve violence.

At the same time, I was fully immersed in an environment where I felt I contributed to positive change around me through my public health volunteer efforts. I wanted to contribute because I consider it the civic duty of every American to help empower and lift others who are less fortunate. But others believed that attacking government officials and their staff in Washington, D.C., was the answer to improving the country.

When the country was supposed to be healing in unison, it was being pulled apart at the seams. Even still, through my service, I felt I was making progress toward a better country, and I was inspired to continue addressing the nation's most pressing healthcare issues. Although I was once interested in becoming a physician, recent events in the country, coupled with my experiences in public service, showed me that public health and health policy are ways I can best make a difference. This includes ensuring equity across traditionally underserved communities – such as indigenous groups.



**I strongly believe that one of the best qualities of America is its resilience.**

**When we all pitch in and meet our civic duties, we can all heal together as one nation, with liberty and justice for all.**

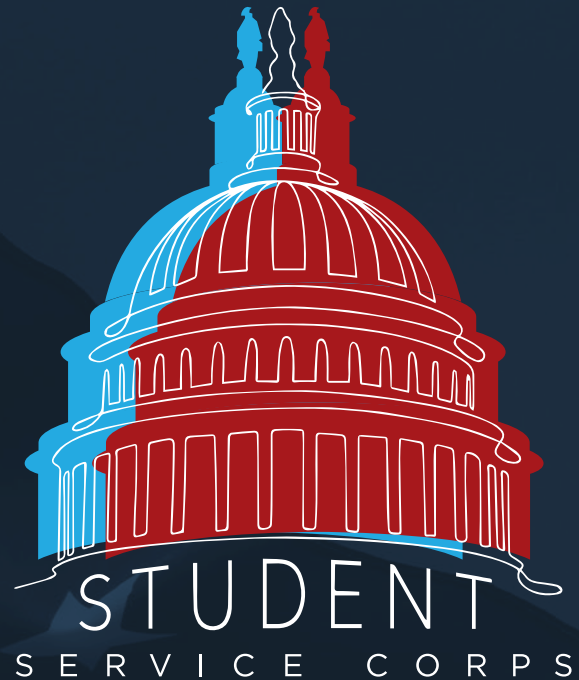


**OMAR KHASAWNEH**

After I returned to the East coast to start my spring semester, I arrived with a sense of clarity that I wanted to pursue a career in public service. So, after another arduous semester at “Zoom University,” I diligently applied to summer programs and internships. I accepted an internship at the National Council of Urban Indian Health – a Washington, D.C.-based organization whose mission closely aligns with my goal to alleviate healthcare disparities in underserved populations. Moreover, I can do so at the intersection of health care and policy and learn from many wonderful individuals who have dedicated their lives to public service.

National security has always been of great importance. Both the pandemic and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol showed us the fragility of a nation divided and the implications a weakened system has on the lives of all Americans. It is up to each of us to learn about the plight of our fellow citizens and act to make this country better. It is paramount we come together as one and not forsake any group of people in our efforts to rebuild.

I strongly believe that one of the best qualities of America is its resilience. When we all pitch in and meet our civic duties, we can all heal together as one nation, with liberty and justice for all.



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# JULIA NILSSON

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

## Connecting Families Through Service

**J**ulia Nilsson is a recipient of the 2021 Bradley E. Johanson Scholarship. She is a freshman at Brigham Young University, where she majors in business administration. Julia enjoys volunteering her time to the BillionGraves project, where she aids others in their family history journeys. In 2021, Ms. Nilsson graduated as the salutatorian of Kaiserslautern High School in Germany.

On January 13, 2009, the USS John C. Stennis, a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy, departed Bremerton, Washington, headed for the Seventh Fleet based in Yokosuka, Japan. The aircraft carrier completed several exercises during deployment and visited ports in China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Singapore. The USS Stennis returned to Bremerton on July 10, 2009. It was a critical deployment for national security, but it also significantly impacted me: my dad was aboard. I was 6 years old at the time, and I remember this period clearly. My mom put a calendar on the wall, and we marked off the days until I could see my dad again. I remember the house was a bit less organized and more scrambled without my dad's extra help. All of us in the family made sacrifices because of my dad's mission on the ship. Because our family is incredibly close, his absence deeply affected me.

One of the reasons my family is so important to me is because they have been the one constant amid change. From my birth, my family and I have moved across the world about every three years. I have lived on multiple stations on both the East and

West Coasts of the United States and overseas in Italy and Germany. Despite drastic changes and differences in language, food, driving styles, and social groups, my family has always been with me.

Because of my family's impact on me, I have chosen to serve others by helping people become closer to their families. I have undertaken many service projects involving families and family history. These service projects include assisting others in building their family trees, going through photographs, labeling each family member, recording memories and stories of ancestors, and locating cemeteries where they may be buried. My favorite project has been documenting headstones in cemeteries for the BillionGraves project, which is the "world's largest resource for searchable GPS cemetery data." While in Germany, I realized that most of its cemeteries were absent from the BillionGraves project database, and almost none of the available records had pictures attached. So, I started with the cemetery next to my house and took photos of every headstone and transcribed many of them. In the end, I was able to add eight German cemeteries to the website and contribute 2,744 images and 476 transcriptions. The BillionGraves project currently reports that I have helped 451 people find their ancestors. As part of a military family, I understand how it feels to be without a loved one. Through family history, I can help connect others to their ancestors as well as living relatives.

As a result of my hard work throughout high school and many service projects, I was selected as a 2021 recipient of the Bradley E. Johanson Scholarship. This scholarship supports the educational



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Although I have lived across the world, my dad's service has always instilled in me immense pride to be an American.

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Julia Nilsson

advancement of spouses and children of USS Stennis crew members and honors the life and legacy of Capt. Bradley E. Johanson, former commanding officer of the USS Stennis who died in 2010 after a battle with ALS. I was excited to discover the scholarship, and to be selected as a recipient feels unreal! I am elated to be recognized, especially for a scholarship that represents such an important time in my life. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity and give my thanks to the Stennis Center for Public Service. I plan to attend Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, to continue my education.

Although I have lived across the world, my dad's service has always instilled in me immense pride to be an American. While writing in my journal one night, I turned on the German news and watched the insurrection unfold. I was astonished and immediately felt embarrassed that Germany saw Americans behave this way. It was jarring to see so many mask-less people gathered in one place, but the purpose of the gathering was much worse. I could not believe so many people would come together to stop the democratic process in that way. It seemed to me like trying to harass the weatherman to make sure next week is sunny.

I was extremely shocked at the actions of my fellow Americans. I took President Biden's remarks to be especially meaningful when he said, "The scenes of chaos at the Capitol do not reflect a true America, do not represent who we are." I especially hoped the international community listened to these words. As a nation, I believe America has always been dedicated to improving and becoming the best version of itself. Events, like what took place on January 6, 2021, are outliers that will not disrupt the course of our nation.

I am so grateful to be an American and to have the opportunity to write about some of my experiences. I am especially appreciative of my dad for his continued service in the U.S. Navy. I am also delighted to be recognized as a recipient of the Bradley E. Johanson Scholarship and excited to continue my educational journey. I would encourage others to participate in service projects to experience the same joy and gratitude I have felt.

For more information about the BillionGraves project, please visit <https://billiongraves.com/>.

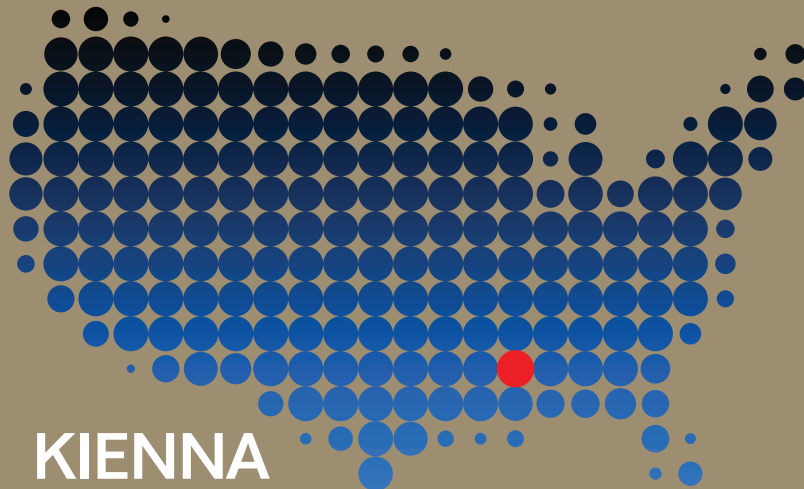
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**KIENNA  
VAN DELLEN**  
MISSISSIPPI COLLEGE

## Interview with Former U.S. Rep. Gregg Harper

**K**ienna Van Dellen is a junior at Mississippi College, where she majors in journalism with a minor in administration of justice. She is currently the editor-in-chief for the campus newspaper, the *Mississippi Collegian*.

Read an excerpt of Kienna Van Dellen's interview with former U.S. Rep. Gregg Harper, where he reflects on his decade in Congress and shares some of his most rewarding experiences and accomplishments. For the full interview, please visit [www.stennis.gov](http://www.stennis.gov).

**Kienna Van Dellen:** What made you want to enter public service/politics?

**Former U.S. Rep. Gregg Harper:** My senior year [at Mississippi College], I was asked to work at a phone bank for a statewide campaign. It was in a large room with tables and phones all over the place, and we would call for support and ask for contributions. The campaign was for Judge Charles Pickering, who sought the [Republican] nomination for the U.S. Senate seat in 1978 and lost to U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran. That whet my appetite.

**Kienna:** As a former U.S. Representative from Mississippi's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District, you served as chairman for the U.S. Committee on House Administration. What were the responsibilities of the committee, and what were your responsibilities as chairman?

**Harper:** When I was a freshman in Congress, then-House Minority Leader/future Speaker John Boehner put me on the U.S. Committee on House Administration. I served on that committee all ten years, and in my last two years, I served as chairman of that committee. The unofficial title of that position is "mayor of Capitol Hill." You receive all complaints. On a more serious note, you are responsible for the U.S. Capitol Police, U.S. House Sergeant at Arms, Smithsonian Institution, and the Library of Congress. That means you are responsible for over 40,000 employees.

**Kienna:** In 2017, you were chairman of the U.S. Committee on House Administration when a shooting took place during one of the annual Congressional Baseball Game for Charity practices. The incident injured U.S. Rep. Stephen Scalise and U.S. Capitol Police Special Agent Krystal Griner, among others. How did the committee respond to the event?

**Harper:** One of the primary responsibilities [of the U.S. Committee on House Administration] is to protect members and their families, staff, and visitors that come to the U.S. Capitol Complex. I worked with our leadership and the Federal Election Commission to get permission so that members, if they needed to, could use their campaign funds to pay for security measures at home. For instance, they could install an alarm system or camera system.



**Kienna:** On Jan. 6, 2017, you served as one of the Electoral College Tally Clerks. As a public servant, what did this responsibility represent to you?

**Harper:** To be the only U.S. House Republican as one of four Electoral College Tally Clerks on Jan. 6, 2017, was special. It was remarkable to not only be there but be able to go up at the podium that day and announce Mississippi's Electoral College votes as part of the process. I did it for several states that were rotated among the four Tally Clerks, but they specifically let you announce your state. I have a picture of that moment in my office, with Speaker Paul Ryan and then-Vice President Joe Biden over my left shoulder. It is a great part of our nation's history, and it meant a lot to me to be a part of the process. I was able to do so because I was chairman of the U.S. Committee on House Administration. I am so thankful for that opportunity.

**Kienna:** You were also at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, during the insurrection. What was that experience like for you?

**Harper:** Four years previous, I was there in that Electoral College Tally Clerk role. Since it is such an important part of history, I thought I would go to the U.S. House Chamber and watch the proceedings. I came in through one of the U.S. House Office Buildings and went through the tunnel to the U.S. Capitol, so I

never knew there was a buildup of protesters outside until I was in the U.S. House Chamber.

I was there about 20 minutes before officers rushed in and bolted all of the doors, upstairs and downstairs, and told everyone to stay put and put on a gas mask [that are under the seats] if something happened. After the officers came in and locked the doors, we heard many voices and glass breaking. The officers realized they would not be able to hold their position, so they ushered everyone out and took us to the tunnel. We went to the Rayburn House Office Building first and then the Longworth House Office Building. I was there with my successor, U.S. Rep. Michael Guest, and we watched some TVs in one of the back rooms. When Fox News Corp. announced our secure location, we decided to go to U.S. Rep. Trent Kelly's office, also from Mississippi, where U.S. Rep. Steve Palazzo of Mississippi came to join us. Nine hours after my decision to go to the U.S. Capitol, I realized that it was not my best decision.

The U.S. Capitol is such a special place, and it was terrible to see pictures and the optics from that day. It was an event that was absolutely predictable and absolutely preventable, and as bad as it was, it could have been much worse. When you look at the aftermath and what happened, we could have had a much worse, different outcome. I am thankful that then-Vice President Mike Pence was safe and that many others remained safe, and of course, you grieve for the lives lost. It can never happen again.



Kienna Van Dellen visits with Mississippi College President Dr. Blake Thompson, Former U.S. Representative Gregg Harper, and Stennis Center for Public Service Executive Director Dr. Brian Pugh on the campus of Mississippi College.

**Kienna:** How do we move American democracy forward?

**Harper:** That is certainly a broad statement and difficult to define. Republicans and Democrats tend to define American democracy differently, and it should have a uniform definition. It is undoubtedly different in Congress than it was 25 years ago. Social media is not our friend most of the time. We have to keep in mind that we all have challenges. It goes a long way to treat people how you want to be treated. We need not make it all personal. Some of my closest friends in Congress are on the other side of the aisle, and although our politics and philosophies are different, it is important to maintain those relationships and move forward.

**Kienna:** You created an intern program in coordination with George Mason University, now called the *Gregg and Livingston Harper Congressional Internship Program for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities*. Since you launched this program in 2010, nearly 300 congressional offices from the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate have participated in the program. This topic is personal to me, as I have two brothers with cerebral palsy, bright and intellectual individuals who happen to be in wheelchairs. You created this program in honor of your son, Livingston. Can you tell me more about the program?

**Harper:** I had no idea that you were a triplet! It is really special to know your family story. We did not start the program in honor of Livingston. We started it more so because of our experiences with Livingston if that makes sense. Livingston has Fragile X syndrome. He has challenges in every area, but he lights up a room and is fun to be around. As my wife says, Livingston is a “G” looking for an “O” and likes to go! Because he has challenges, we are aware of what families have to go through, like transportation and employment.

The U.S. Committee on House Administration has jurisdiction over intern programs, but there was no program available for students with intellectual disabilities. We were able to work with George Mason University through its program, Mason Learning Into Future Environments, or LIFE. In 2010, we started a small pilot program with its George Mason LIFE students. It began with six students in some of the Republican offices, and it was so successful it became a permanent program. Now, as you have said, over 300 offices in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate have participated in the program. One of the main points of the program is to help these students be independent. The students would always start out nervous, and by the end of the semester, they were like part of our family, our team, and they would move on to other offices.

In December 2018, I brought Livingston [to Washington, D.C.] one last time in my role as a U.S. Representative. There was a large reception in the Rayburn Reception Room in the U.S. House to honor the students who participated in the George Mason LIFE program that semester. The room was full of members from both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate, lots of staffers, all of the students from the program, and Livingston and me. U.S. Rep. Rodney Davis of Illinois was there as kind of the master of

ceremonies. He called Livingston and myself to the front and announced that the program was now called the *Gregg and Livingston Harper Congressional Internship Program for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities*. That was a moment. It made the ten years of the hassle and travel and separation from family all worthwhile. Of all the things I have done, that program means the most, and we are so thankful for that opportunity.

**Kienna:** Do you have any advice for students as they try to find their passion and what they want to do?

**Harper:** Usually, when you are in school, you do not know what you will do. Later on, you will look back and see how it worked out. On her first day of college, I remember my daughter Maggie said that, in her first class, the professor stated, “It is not what you know; it is who you know.” She probably did not remember much else from that class, but she remembered that. There is a lot of truth to that. Be nice to people you come in contact with because you never know what that person will accomplish in life. I probably would have been a lot nicer to John Grisham in law school if I would have known he would be that famous!

Before social media, you would hear from parents and teachers “to be careful because that could be a part of your permanent record.” Now, students have to be careful when they are on their computer or smart devices, as what they put on their texts or social media posts do become a piece of their permanent record. So, please be cautious about how you use social media.

Also, if you want to be somewhat involved in campaigns and elections, get involved as a volunteer. It gives you a different perspective. Too, your reputation matters. Nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes and hope we do not wind up on a 30-second commercial against us, but be careful about your walk and know you will have opportunities to make a difference. It boils down to being a servant and putting others first.

**Kienna:** Thank you! I appreciate your time today.



Kienna Van Dellen meets Former U.S. Representative Gregg Harper on the campus of Mississippi College.



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**JODY-ANN  
CAMPBELL**  
LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

## Creating an Idealistic Democracy

**J**ody-Ann Campbell is a senior at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and she serves as a committee person and secretary for the Norristown Democrats.

“This is Jody; she’s a part of some diversity program.” This is how a white male lawyer, who I was shadowing, introduced me to one of his white male colleagues. The only problem is there was no diversity program. I was set up with this firm by a mentor after completing a community service challenge, but clearly, he thought I was there just because I was Black.

This was one of the first times I came face to face with entrenched racism. After the George Floyd protests and the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, I quickly realized that racism is indeed a national security threat. As a Black woman, I was part of this conversation whether I chose to be or not.

When I was 14 years old, I left behind the only place I knew as home, Kingston, Jamaica, to pursue the American dream. Though my family and I started from scratch in a foreign land, we did not give up hope and continued to hold on to the promise of opportunity. We settled in Norristown, Pennsylvania, a community that I later realized was also trying to actualize its own American dream.

My dreams became ingrained with my community’s dreams. Together, my community and I searched for our answer to this not-so-new yet unique national security threat: the demonization of Black skin. I found the answer through my voice and advocacy, my research into equity in education, and the quest to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Forty-four percent of youth in juvenile detention centers are Black, although Black students only make up 16% of youth in the United States. This disparity is due to the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately affects Black communities. My research showed that equitable funding plays a vital role in academic success and how we fund our schools ultimately impacts the fate of many Black youths. As a young Black woman, I saw this reality come alive as a major national security threat. It is the lack of education that culminates into unprecedented circumstances like the Jan. 6 insurrection. I delved into three specific ways to dismantle racism, the new national security threat, including 1. engaging young people of color in public policy, 2. soliciting local community members to have candid conversations about moving society forward, and 3. partnering with the backbone of democracy, Black women, to help heal our communities.

My experience taught me that a key component of addressing racism in our communities is to engage young people. That is why I founded the Young Scholars Mentorship Program at my high school, a grassroots social advocacy group. Through this program, I helped to develop leadership programs and advocate for Black students. The program executed important community events, like Diversity Day, MLK Day of Service, and The Women’s Empowerment Summit. These events were completely planned and organized by young students of color, which had not happened before. Additionally, the program allowed students who were frustrated with the system to provide valuable input and implement the change they wanted to see. I am proud to say that four years after I founded the program, it is still going strong, enriching both students and the community.





Another essential component of addressing racism in our communities is to engage local community leaders through public conversations. As a Black woman, I wanted to make sure my voice was heard after the death of George Floyd. I felt unsafe in the environment I called home and realized that this was true for many Black Americans. The Young Scholars Mentorship Program had a unique opportunity to partner with a local organization, PowerUp PAC, to lead and organize a forum called “What’s Next in the Fight Against Social Inequality.” We were impressed and excited that powerful politicians, including a congresswoman, a councilman, several commissioners, state senators, and the police chief, came to have a candid conversation with the community. This forum helped shed light on the disparities affecting Black students in our community. After the event, the elected officials promised that the public defender’s office would soon be a separate entity in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, to better protect our community. I felt immense pride and hope because it was still a step forward even though these were only baby steps.

Lastly, as a Black woman, a student at an HBCU, and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., I have a unique understanding of the power of Black women in today’s era and the role we undoubtedly played in building America’s democracy. As a class president and student senate representative, I had the

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My open-mindedness to views that are different from mine challenged me and shaped the person I am today. As an aspiring public defender, I endeavor to cultivate an understanding and tolerance for different cultures as we work to move our democracy forward.

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Jody-Ann Campbell



honor and privilege to partner with multiple organizations on my densely female populated campus to address issues around race and discrimination. Through these opportunities, I recognized that to address racism, Black women must be at the center of these conversations.

While I thought I had figured out the magic formula to eliminate racism from my community, I watched in disbelief as a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol. I was evicted from the safe space I had created for myself in my thoughts and found that there was suddenly nowhere for me. The America that breathed me hope, the country that my brother serves in the military uniform, was lost. This is not who we are.

The national security threat that ensued, leading to the U.S. Capitol attack on Jan. 6, was not caused by a single entity or solely by racism. A lack of education on the validity of our democracy and the value of human life caused it. It is only in America that white ignorance breeds privilege. If it were any other color, that ignorance would breed death. I only wish more people understood that there are ways to be consistent with your values while simultaneously respecting and acknowledging the views of others.

In America, my role in service began and continues with a conversation. My open-mindedness to views that are different from mine challenged me and shaped the person I am today. As an aspiring public defender, I endeavor to cultivate an understanding and tolerance for different cultures as we work to move our democracy forward. Through the practice of holistic defense and addressing clients' most pressing needs in Montgomery County, I will aid in dismantling these ever-present national security threats.

Change starts with a conversation. This may be a difficult conversation to have, but the fact of the matter still stands: how can you hate me when you don't even know me? The distance we create between ourselves contributes to misunderstandings, which can often lead to violence. I want to spend time exploring ways to bridge the gap through public service. After all, "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America, there is the United States of America." The color of my skin should not be a national security threat.







# DELTA SCHOLARS

CULTIVATING CHANGE-MAKERS IN MISSISSIPPI

The Delta Scholars Program is a two-part academic and community engagement program for talented and socially conscious college students interested in moving Mississippi and the Delta region towards a brighter, more just tomorrow. Delta Scholars are selected for their academic achievements and commitment to public service to participate in a ten-day Summer Institute in Mississippi followed by a five-day trip to Boston and Harvard University in the fall. Both experiences form a cohort of young leaders thinking critically about systemic injustices in the Mississippi Delta, with each Scholar developing a project that will produce positive social change in their communities. This is a nationally competitive program aimed at sophomores and above from Mississippi or simply committed to social issues there. Open to all majors, there will be special research opportunities for students interested in public health.

For more information, visit [honors.msstate.edu](https://honors.msstate.edu) or contact Dr. Christopher Snyder, Dean of the Shackouls Honors College, at 662.325.2522 or [csnyder@honors.msstate.edu](mailto:csnyder@honors.msstate.edu).

## PARTNERS

The Delta Scholars Program is a collaborative effort between the Shackouls Honors College at Mississippi State University, University of Mississippi's Center for Population Studies, the Delta Directions Consortium, the Harvard School of Public Health, the Harvard Law School, and the Phillips Brooks House Center for Public Service and Engaged Scholarship at Harvard College.

## SUMMER INSTITUTE

The Summer Institute is a ten-day immersion program during which each student works to identify an issue of inequality or injustice that they are interested in. Each student will develop a proposal for a project that will promote dialogue and change around that issue in their own communities or the state of Mississippi broadly.

Students spend the first portion of the program at the Shackouls Honors College at Mississippi State University where they engage with faculty and guest lecturers from a range of disciplines to learn about issues currently challenging the people and the economy of Mississippi, including food insecurity, public health, education, and more. Before concluding the summer program, students take an Innovation Tour of the Delta, where they have the chance to meet and learn from researchers, non-profit organizations, and community members who have worked to tackle difficult issues in their community through bold new approaches and community-led efforts. Students have the opportunity to present their own project proposals at the annual Delta Regional Forum in Clarksdale, MS.

## HARVARD WEEK

Following the Summer Institute, the Delta Scholars reconnect in the fall for five days at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA. This trip provides an opportunity for students to share updates on their projects, receive continuing feedback, reflect on lessons learned from the program, and discuss how those lessons might be applied to solving other problems in or outside of Mississippi. The Scholars also engage with Harvard students and faculty working on Mississippi issues, including Harvard Law students in the Mississippi Delta Project. The goal of this intellectual exchange is to provide both sides with fresh perspectives, promote dialogue that can push their work forward, and foster networks of young leaders that might collaborate in the future.





**JORDAN  
BRANCHMAN**  
AUBURN UNIVERSITY

## Philanthropy: Public Service in Democracy

**J**ordan Branchman, a Montgomery, Alabama, native, is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in public administration at Auburn University. He holds various leadership positions on campus, including assistant vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Student Government Association.

As I approached the vibrant, color picket fence, which enclosed the community garden and the home that once belonged to Lottie B. Curtis—the great-grandfather of Alabama State Representative Jeremy Gray—my perception of how public service and nonprofits influenced democracy expanded. The former family home, known as the Curtis House, is now the home of a nonprofit organization that operates as the epicenter for various health resources and community service projects for the



Grant award ceremony for East Alabama Mental Health Center.





**Representative Gray reassured me that public service and nonprofits are designed to bond community members together despite our differences and that our contrasting political beliefs are merely ways we all believe our country should achieve success.**



**JORDAN BRANCHMAN**



Jordan Branchman meets with Alabama State Representative and founder of the Curtis House, Jeremy Gray.

citizens of Opelika, Alabama. As I grew closer to the home and what it signified, I became fully immersed in what it means to fulfill the needs of a community.

I always valued the societal benefits of the nonprofit sector, but I never envisioned myself as a student who had the time and resources to contribute to the sphere of public service. However, my recent encounters with philanthropy, and a particular encounter with Representative Gray, provided me with insight into how America can evolve and strengthen in the face of adversity through the embedded principles of public service in the nonprofit sector.

### **An Introduction to Philanthropy**

It was Jan. 11, 2021 – five discouraging days after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. It was the start of the spring semester and when I first became immersed in the world of philanthropy and nonprofit studies through a class in which I enrolled. As political tensions covered the United States like a dark cloud, I quickly learned that my unfamiliarity and lack of involvement in the public service sphere made me stand out among my classmates. Unsure of my ability to contribute, I remained silent. As class discussions shifted to more equality-based topics and solutions for vulnerable local communities, I discovered my desire to address economic disparities that disproportionately impacted racial minorities. I had finally found my passion and purpose in philanthropic work, and I wanted to understand better how the nonprofit sector not only impacted our democracy but also how it made it stronger. I was curious to hear the perspective of a legislator and community leader.

It was then that I had the opportunity to meet Representative Gray – a state legislator and founder of the nonprofit organization the Curtis House. I asked, “How do philanthropy and nonprofit work fit into the realm of democracy?”

“It [philanthropy] is a mechanism that allows people who have the ability to give an opportunity to feed into surrounding, local environments,” he explained. “Nonprofit work is conducive for everyone of all backgrounds, and you don’t have to be a Democrat nor a Republican to help others. Whether it’s feeding programs, assisting at-risk teenagers and adults, or mental health services, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations are at the center of solving issues within our society and communities.”

### **Unity Amongst Tragedy**

At the center of our local community in Lee County, Alabama, is a nonprofit organization that desired a sensory playground to assist children with therapeutic needs. The East Alabama Mental Health Center (EAMHC) provides clinical care and resources to families with children who have experienced emotional and/or physical trauma. I was first introduced to EAMHC through an intense, albeit worthwhile, grant writing course that focused on philanthropic giving. As part of the course, we drafted requests for proposals and invited organizations to apply for a grant. My peers and I were then able to award financial resources to a local nonprofit in the Lee County community. We envisioned awarding a nonprofit organization that focused on the root of societal problems and proactively addressed them.



As the grant process drew to a close, it was difficult to make a cohesive decision on how to distribute the grant. We wanted an organization that embodied service, inclusivity, and empathy for residents affected by the harsh realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also wanted to support an organization that wished to turn generational pain into prosperity. We looked at data to help guide our decision. According to 2014 data from the U.S. Department of Education, African American boys make up 18% of children enrolled in preschool yet account for 48% of pre-schoolers who are suspended more than once. It became even more imperative to connect minority and impoverished families with mental health services, like EAMHC and other nonprofits, to further promote equity within our communities.

Unfortunately, our current political climate does not reflect the desired empathy and compassion for others that shines so vividly in the nonprofit sector, so I spoke with Representative Gray again. He encouraged me to understand better how I viewed the relationship between politics and philanthropy and its influence on democracy. Representative Gray reassured me that public service and nonprofits are designed to bond community members together despite our differences and that our contrasting political beliefs are merely ways we all believe our country should achieve success. During times of adversity, Americans have been known to overlook such political differences and reflect the empathic decency found in the nonprofit world. One such example that comes to mind is the destructive tornado that struck Lee County, Alabama, and Representative Gray's district, on March 13, 2019, and claimed the lives of 23 residents.

I asked Representative Gray about how philanthropy and nonprofit work can challenge us to overlook our political, racial, and cultural differences, especially considering the current political tension in the U.S. after the Jan. 6 insurrection.

"When finding solutions and implementing initiatives to rebuild the homes of those in the Lee County Community after the devastating tornado in 2019, we [community members and nonprofit organizations] made decisions based upon the care for Alabamians, and none of our efforts were partisan based," he said. "During times of tragedy, even during times of conflict (i.e., Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riots), we must rise above

politics. Focusing on how we come together, rather than how we differentiate ourselves regarding race or politics, is always the primary goal."

## Lasting Legacy on Democracy

On April 29, 2021, we had the award ceremony for EAMHC, where we congratulated the nonprofit for its contributions to service and awarded them a \$2,000 grant to help fund the sensory playground for children. As we concluded the ceremony, each of the students spoke about their experience in the grant writing course, and I recalled my first day when I felt utterly unaware of my purpose or my potential impact on the nonprofit sector.

As I sat toward the back of the classroom on that first day, philanthropy and nonprofit work seemed so daunting. Yet, I am reminded by public service leaders and philanthropists, like Representative Gray, that the world of philanthropy and nonprofit work brings out the best in all of us, even amid political discord or our own self-doubt.







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